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# **Reclaiming, proclaiming, and maintaining collective identity in the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico: An examination of digital frontstage and backstage activism through social media and instant messaging platforms**

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**8523 words**

## **Abstract**

This article starts from the recognition that digital social movements studies have progressively disregarded collective identity and the importance of internal communicative dynamics in contemporary social movements, in favour of the study of the technological affordances and the organizational capabilities of social media. Based on a two-years multimodal ethnography of the Mexican #YoSoy132 movement, the article demonstrates that the concept of collective identity is still able to yield relevant insights into the study of current movements, especially in connection to the use of social media platforms. Through the appropriations of social media, Mexican students were able to oppose the negative identification fabricated by the PRI party, reclaim their agency and their role as heirs of a long tradition of rebellion, generate collective identification processes, and find ‘comfort zones’ to lower the costs of activism, reinforcing their internal cohesion and solidarity. The article stresses the importance of the internal communicative dynamics that develop in the backstage of social media (Facebook chats and groups) and through instant messaging services (WhatsApp), thus rediscovering the pivotal linkage between collective identity and internal communication that characterized the first wave of research on digital social movements. The findings point out how that internal cohesion and collective identity are fundamentally shaped and reinforced in the social media backstage by practices of ‘ludic activism’, which indicates that social media represent not only the organizational backbone of contemporary social movements, but also multifaceted ecologies where a new, expressive and humorous ‘communicative resistance grammar’ emerges.

## **Introduction, outline, and methods**

This article is based on the recognition that one of the main concerns of the first wave of digital social movement studies, i.e. the exploration of the dimension of collective identity and its connection to the (internal) communicative dynamics of protest movements, has progressively disappeared in the current literature on social media platforms and digital activism 2.0. In contrast to this tendency, relying on an extensive ethnography of the Mexican #YoSoy132 movement, this article shows that the concept of collective identity is still able to yield relevant insights into the study of current social movements, especially in connection to the use of social media platforms. The article first introduces the controversial concept of collective identity and critically reviews two waves of analyses on digital media and social movements, arguing that a) the interest for collective identity has progressively been replaced by the attention to technological affordances and organizational dynamics, b) this disregard has been paired by an excessive attention to the data that can be gathered on the *frontstage* of social media platforms (Twitter streams, Facebook posts, etc.), at the expense of the *backstage* (Facebook chats and groups, email lists, WhatsApp exchanges, etc.). After examining the emergence of the #YoSoy132 and its main characteristics, drawing on theoretical contributions from different strands of literature (social movements scholarship, radical democracy theory and media studies), the article demonstrates that through the appropriations of social media, Mexican activists were able to reclaim, proclaim and maintain their collective identity. First, the same emergence of the movement is regarded as an act of identity *reclamation* in opposition to a biased media portrayal that was ignited on YouTube and then spread on Twitter. Second, it is pointed out how Mexican activists *proclaimed* their rightful belonging to the history of Mexican insurgencies, in order to ground and strengthen their collective identity. Third, it is argued that the emergence and the development of new networks of trust and solidarity among Mexican protesters were able to *maintain* over time the collective identity of the movement. Throughout the analysis, and particularly in relation to this last point, the importance of *social media backstage practices* carried out on Facebook chats and groups and instant messaging services such as WhatsApp is stressed, thus rediscovering the linkage between collective identity and internal communicative dynamics. Finally, I examine how internal cohesion and identity are shaped and reinforced in the ‘digital comfort zones’ constituted by the backstage where practices of “ludic activism” (Banski et al, 2013, p.6) unfold. The findings indicate that social media represent not only the

organizational backbone of contemporary social movements, but also complex environments where a new ‘communicative grammar’ strongly emerges.

The article is grounded in a two yearlong multimodal ethnography that relies on the triangulation of different methodologies. 50 individual interviews were conducted with activists of #YoSoy132, in particular with key informants who created and managed digital platforms, had a prominent role in handling relations with the press, or were active participants in the ‘Media Taskforce’ for the democratization of the Mexican media. In addition, I performed four group interviews with 9 activists of Mexico City, 7 activists of Guadalajara, and 3 activists of Querétaro, with the aim of bringing a richness of perspectives from the most active centre of student protest (Mexico City), but also from other relevant sites of protest (Guadalajara), and from more peripheral realities (Querétaro). The ethnography also comprised several short periods of participant observation (during 2012 and 2013) in demonstrations, meetings, assemblies both at the local and at the national level, along with participation to informal encounters, and academic venues with intense dialogue between scholars and activists. A qualitative content analysis was performed on digital media and online platforms, including the official Web site of the movement, Facebook pages, chats and groups, Twitter accounts, WhatsApp messages of local committees and collectives part of #YoSoy132, documents, posters, leaflets and manifestos produced by protesters in diverse Mexican cities. The different gathered data sets were uploaded, organized, and analysed with the NVivo software.

### **The controversial concept of collective identity**

In the wake of the cycle of protest that culminated in 1968, a new wave of scholars pointed to non-class based movements as the new agents of social and political change. Unsatisfied with more instrumental explanations of collective action, such as resource mobilization theory and the political process model, new social movements’ theorists (Melucci, 1985; Touraine et al, 1983, 1987) highlighted the relevance of collective identity as the factor that accounts for mobilization and individual attachments, and pointed out the need to consider cultural factors, emotions, and networks of meanings when analysing social movements. If the concept of identity is one of the most controversial concepts of the social sciences, the notion of collective identity has also always been at the heart of a heated debate, especially regarding the slippery contours of its definition (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). The concept has also been

criticized as an *orthodoxy* (McDonald, 2002), but its usefulness has been recently restated as a “concept that continues to yield rich insights into the understanding of social movements” (Flesher Fominaya, 2010: 401). At its most basic level, collective identity is a shared sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency” (Snow 2001). Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci describes it as “an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientation of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place” (1995, p. 44). Taylor and Whittier (1992) agree with Melucci on the idea that collective identities require that a group share definition about its place in the larger society, but add three additional analytical tools: boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation. With *boundaries*, they refer to “the social, psychological, and physical structures that establish differences between a challenging group and dominant groups” (111). *Consciousness* denotes instead “the interpretive frameworks that emerge out of a challenging group’s struggle to define and realize its interests” (111). Finally, *negotiation* entails “the symbols and everyday actions subordinate groups use to resist and restructure existing systems of domination” (Taylor and Whittier 1992, p. 111). Hence, collective identity can be seen as a process enacted through a set of rituals, practices and cultural artefacts where the dimension of negotiation is central (Taylor & Whittier 1992, p. 18).

From an extensive review of the literature regarding the processes by which action ‘constitutes’ identity, della Porta and Diani (2006) have outlined three main mechanisms. First, as highlighted by the model developed by Taylor and Whittier, actors have to define boundaries. The identification of the ‘other’, defined as responsible for the actor’s condition and against which the protest arises is as indispensable as the construction of a ‘we’ characterized by common traits and solidarity. In their conceptual framework, Benford and Snow (2000) also stress the existence of oppositional frames that explain the problem and identify the enemy. Therefore, the construction of identity presupposes a positive definition of those participating in a certain group, and at the same time a negative identification of those who are opposed. Second, “collective identity connects and assigns some common meaning to experiences of collective action dislocated over time and space” (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 95), what Adler (2012) calls “common origin frames”. Accordingly, activists link together events from past struggles in order to inscribe themselves within an enduring fight that precedes, justifies and reinforces the meaning of the actual form of collective action. Finally, the production of identities is accompanied by

“the emergence of new networks of relationships of trust among actors, operating within complex social environments” (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 94): these networks form the basis for the development of informal communication networks, interaction and support among activists.

### **The role of collective identity within two waves of studies on digital media and social movements**

In the following section, I will critically review the two waves of studies on digital media and social movements, focusing on the role of collective identities and (internal) communicative dynamics. It is important to stress that I am not advocating for a clear, neat distinction between a first wave and a second wave of social movements and digital media studies. However, for the analytical purposes of this article, it is useful to point out that first studies on internet and movements focused on emails, mailing lists, online forums, bulletin boards, and Websites, whereas, after the introduction of social media into movements’ repertoire, scholars have started to increasingly address social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This does not mean that scholars 2.0 do not address 1.0 technologies anymore, and that there are not complex and frequent overlaps between the two strands of literature, but only that social movements literature is shaped to a great extent (and sometimes excessively) by the technologies which are used by activists and that are more ‘popular’ at a given time (Author, 2014a).

Throughout the evaluation of the literature, two main arguments will be put forward. First, the fact that digital social movement studies 1.0 revealed a vivid interest in the examination of the nexus between collective identity and the (internal) communicative dynamics of social movements. Second, the point that this kind of interest has progressively vanished in digital social movement studies 2.0 that a) are more inclined to study organizational dynamics, technological affordances and transnational connections; b) tend to privilege the data that can be collected on the ‘external spaces’ of social media platforms (Twitter streams, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, etc.), neglecting internal communicative dynamics.

#### ***Collective identity in digital social movement studies 1.0***

Studies related to the organizational dimension of social movements always held a centrality within the literature, and this significance transferred to the examination of how protest movement organizations are affected by the introduction of digital media. Alongside this

centrality, however, especially in the *first wave* of studies on digital activism, several works started to tackle how other movements' aspects were being reshaped by communication technologies, examining the construction and maintenance of collective identity through digital media (Ayers, 2003; Castells, 1997, 2007; Cronauer, 2004; Gamson, 2003; Hara and Estrada, 2005; Nip, 2004; Kavada, 2007, 2009, 2010; Pickerill, 2003; Wall, 2007). Authors as Gamson (2003) examined the Web site *Gay Media, Inc.*, warning about the commodification of collective identities online, and urging for the creation of identities aimed at social change and empowerment. Based on interviews with the online *NOW Village* and the offline activist organization *Womanspace* members, Ayers (2003) tried to find out if the members of the online activist group could develop the same kind of collective identity of the group that frequently met offline. In the same line, Nip (2004) sought to examine the identity-building potential of internet technologies for protest movements, by studying a women's group in Hong Kong, the Queer Sisters, and their online bulletin board. Other scholars explored the potential of e-mail and mailing lists for collective identity building, in particular within the Global Justice movement. Cronauer's analysis (2004) of two mailing lists of the Global Justice movement focused on the online/offline correlation of levels of engagement, and on the factors that thwarted subscribers' participation and mobilization. Wall (2007) studied how collective identity traits unfolded within three email lists of the Seattle World Trade Organization protests, one used by a professional organization (Friends of the Earth) and the other two by grassroots, street-level participants (Direct Action Network and People's Global Action). Kavada (2007, 2009, 2010, 2012) has explored at length the dimension of collective identity in relation to internal communicative dynamics. Starting from the recognition of collective identity formation as a fundamental communicative process, she has focused on its analysis within email lists devoted to the organizing of the London 2004 European Social Forum, looking at various dimensions (bonding, trust-building and interactivity) and comparing patterns of online and offline participation.

The contribution that digital media bring about to the construction and maintenance of collective identities is a controversial issue, with some authors arguing that communication technologies do not have a significant impact on identity formation (Ayers, 2003; Pickerill, 2003), other scholars pointing out both benefits and concerns (Kavada, 2007, 2009), whereas others contend that in the online environment identities can be successfully formed and maintained (Hara and Estrada, 2005, p. 504). Beyond the dissimilar outcomes of the scholarship,

these discussions point to a vivid interest in the exploration of the link between collective identity and (digital) communication. Furthermore, they signal a specific consideration for the exploration of the internal communicative dynamics of social movements (in particular emails and mailing lists), and a connection between everyday activists' practices and identity maintenance over time. This kind of interest and attention will progressively vanish in 2.0 studies on protest movements and social media.

### ***Collective identity in digital social movement studies 2.0***

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, and in particular of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and their introduction into social movements' communication repertoires (Mattoni, 2012) has given birth to another wave of studies on digital activism that urges to develop "theory 2.0" approaches (Earl & Kimport, 2011), i.e. a renovation of our theoretical tools in order to understand the game-changing dynamics of networked movements. In this new wave of research, the interest for the formation and upholding of collective identity and solidarity has progressively diminished (with some remarkable exceptions that, however, do not look at internal communicative dynamics in social media, but focus on identity negotiations in the social media frontstage: Kavada, 2012; Svensson et al., 2014), in favour of more instrumental aspects of social movements. This characteristic is clear if we look at the studies developed in the last years (for a thought-provoking and extensive review, see: Earl et al., 2014), where the analysis of the dimension of organization in relation to communication technologies prominently surpasses other *less instrumental* effects on movements. In one of the most relevant theories that in the last decade has been advanced in order to understand the role that digital media play in contemporary mobilizations, the logic of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), the authors emphasize the role of communication as an *organizing principle* in personalized, digitally networked action and suggests that digital media become in fact *organizational agents*. The authors contend that if within mobilizations that adhere to the conventional logic of collective action digital media do not significantly alter the outcomes, in the 'purest' form of connective action, the crowd-enabled type (as in the Occupy movement), digital media's role is paramount: communication technologies become organizing agents and change the dynamics of action, replacing the need for strong organizational control and for the symbolic construction of a united 'we', i.e. the need for collective identities.



This disinterest for the dimension of collective identity has been paired by the progressive disregard for internal communication dynamics, with the attention of researchers focused even more on external communication processes, the organizational dimension, and on the transnational connections of contemporary protest movements. In part, this is due to the nature of these platforms, where huge amounts of personal data are constantly made visible and shared with others on threads, streams and groups, raising serious issues of privacy, exploitation and sociality. This massive quantity of data produced by activists through their online protest activities has contributed to *a computational turn* (Tufekci, 2014) in social movements and media studies, i.e. a significant growth in the application of quantitative methods in the examination of enormous protest-related datasets available on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia. This research has flourished at different latitudes: on the Occupy movement (Bennett, Segerberg & Walker, 2014), on the Arab Spring (Starbird & Palen, 2012), the Spanish *Indignados* (Toret et al., 2012), and the *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece (Theocharis et al., 2014). Most of these studies focus solely on the data that can be gathered through specific software on the ‘external spaces’ of social media platforms (Twitter streams, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, etc.). The progressive disregard for the dimension of collective identity and of internal communicative dynamics of social movements should be viewed in light the current tendency of the literature to privilege the more manifest performances of social movements and to neglect the everyday communication practices that sustain them over time (Flesher-Fominaya, 2015; Jordan, 2013). This “conflation of social movement activity with mobilization” (Flesher-Fominaya, 2015, p. 2) brings to an excessive attention to dynamics of public, external communication, at the expense of internal dynamics and daily communicative exchanges through which activists organize, create and nurture collective identities. As scholars have noted (Ganesh and Stohl, 2010) current studies tend to focus especially on the technological affordances of social media and to stress their organizational capabilities, rather than seeing them as spaces for the exchanges of meaning, the creation and sharing of expressive forms of communication, the construction of a new sense of belonging through Twitter hashtags, Facebook groups and other online tactics (Gerbaudo, 2014), and disregarding the affordances they offer activists for the exploration of their multifaceted identities (Svensson et al., 2014). Similarly, discussing the last cycle of contention, and moving beyond the emphasis on instrumental effects, certain scholars have drawn attention to the importance of humour, irony, and parody for the development of a new type of

“ludic activism” (Banski et al, 2013, p.6) in contemporary movements. For instance, Romanos (2013) has found that Spanish Indignados frequently adopted various forms of humour to cool tempers in moments of stress, and to lower the costs of activism in relation to fatigue. Additionally, he pointed out that the exchange of humorous material through internal communicative practices reinforced internal cohesion and solidarity. His findings echo Flesher Fominaya’s reflections (2007) on the decisive role of humour in generating a sense of common identification and solidarity within autonomous anti-capitalist groups in Madrid.

This discussion points to the key role of digital media in providing not only the organizational infrastructure in which protests and mobilizations are propelled and coordinated, but also in constituting the communicative ecologies where the expressive forms of communication that characterize the younger networked generations, are manufactured, shared and appropriated.

### **The emergence of #YoSoy132: Identity reclamation against manipulative media control**

The #YoSoy132 movement emerged less than two months before the Mexican federal elections at a time when Mexico seemed ready for a change after 12 years under the National Action Party (PAN). Before the PAN government, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled the country for seven decades, and in the 2012 elections the PRI was credited by polls as the favourite party, with Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) leading the coalition *Commitment for Mexico*. On Friday, May 11, 2012, EPN arrived at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City to give a conference. During the candidate’s presentation, students began to question him with posters regarding the police repression in Atenco that occurred in 2006 when EPN was governor of the state of Mexico. When EPN justified Atenco’s violent repression, the tension rose and he had to leave the university surrounded by a security cordon. The triggers that led students to organize were the subsequent statements released by various prominent PRI politicians who qualified them as thugs, violent, fascist, and intolerant, going so far as to deny their affiliation with the university and insinuate that they were being used by the left to discredit the PRI candidate. Mexican television networks and the newspaper chain *Organización Editorial Mexicana* (affiliated with the PRI) presented versions of the event where EPN was depicted as a hero against a boycott organized by the left. Facing manipulative media coverage, 131 university

students of the Universidad Iberoamericana published a video on YouTube<sup>1</sup> in which they exhibited their student credentials and read their full names to criticize the politicians who had accused them of being criminals not affiliated with the university. The video immediately enjoyed a tremendous success, and other students started to show their solidarity by stating, “I’m 132”, leading to the creation of the Twitter hashtag #YoSoy132 that went on to identify the whole movement.

The same combination that ignited the eruption of the movement, the need for media democratization, and the rejection of the so-called imposition of EPN as president, came to constitute the main pillars of the movement’s collective struggle. Mexico is characterized by an influential *telecracy*, the imposition of the interests of the advertising dealers of the TV monopolies over the interests of the whole Mexican society and the public interest (Esteinou and Alva de la Selva 2011), where two media goliaths (Televisa and TV Azteca) encompass 99% of the audience and advertising market (Huerta and Gómez, 2013). The need to democratize the Mexican media has been the pivotal concern of the #YoSoy132 movement (AUTHOR, 2014b). As stated in their manifesto<sup>2</sup>, the movement “wants the democratization of the mass media, in order to guarantee transparent, plural and impartial information to foster critical consciousness and thought”. As also the international press has disclosed, the PRI party and the Televisa network constructed the image of EPN over six years and planned an undercover strategy to present him in several TV programs in a positive way, while developing a strategy against the candidate of the left (Tuckman, 2012). Through countless performances, demonstrations and interventions, #YoSoy132 activists have protested against what they saw as the clear imposition of Enrique Peña Nieto by the Mexican telecracy. The movement produced numerous reports on how to reform the Mexican media, and organized the first electoral debate in the Mexican history broadcasted on social media and on radio stations, and the first to be organized by civil society and not by the Federal Electoral Institute.

### **Collective identity through social media frontstage and backstage practices**

As I previously elucidated, in digital social movement studies 2.0, the disinterest for the dimension of collective identity has been paired by the disregard for internal communication

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7XbocXsFkI> (Accessed 19 June 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igxPudJF6nU> (Accessed 20 June 2014. My translation from the original Spanish).

dynamics: studies have mainly tackled the digital *frontstage* of social media (Twitter streams, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, etc.), but largely overlooked the interactions in the *backstage*<sup>3</sup>, such as for instance discussions within Facebook closed groups and chats, Twitter direct messages, and instant messaging conversations. The next sections are organized around three of the main mechanisms of identity construction that I previously highlighted: a) construction of boundaries, b) connection to a protest heritage, and c) building and maintenance of networks of trust and solidarity. I will first show how activists reclaimed and erected the boundaries of their identity in opposition to a manipulative media coverage. Then, the ways through which the movement proclaimed its collective identity by connecting its fight to the Mexican tradition of struggle will be examined. Finally, the construction of networks of relationships and trust among activists will be scrutinised. During the analysis of the findings, I recognize the importance of both the frontstage and the backstage of social media, stressing that while the former was particularly relevant in the delimitation of the movement's boundaries, the latter acquired a key role in the process of maintaining and strengthening networks of trust among activists, providing 'comfort zones' where practices of 'ludic activism' developed.

Before exploring the findings, some limitations of the research have to be emphasized. First of all, the communicative ecology of the movement is broad and includes other digital platforms than social media, several alternative media, and an intricate set of physical interactions. Nevertheless, the aim of the article is not to examine the communication repertoire of the movement, but to look at social media as stratified spaces, where both the frontstage and the backstage contribute to the construction and maintenance of collective identities. The second limitation is that the paper focuses only on certain elements of identity building in detail (boundaries, heritage and networks), while giving less attention to others (e.g. frames, narratives, emotions). This is justified by the fact that the article does not strive for comprehensiveness, but

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3 Regarding the concepts of front- and backstage activism, I am of course indebted to the work on the self-presentation of the self of Erving Goffman (1959), where the author provides a "dramaturgical" account of social interaction as a theatrical performance. When individuals perform a role in relation to an audience in public settings, we can think of this as frontstage, similar to an actor on stage who is presenting a performance. Instead, the backstage is a place where the actors can express aspects of themselves in ways that their audience would find unacceptable and where performers can relax and step out of character. The literature that has applied Goffman's dramaturgical approach to social media and the presentation of the self is extensive (for a review see Hogan, 2010), and engaging with it is far from the intentions of this article. The concept will be used in this article in order to shed light on the complexity of social media, conceived as intricate communicative ecosystems that can be used by activists in multiple ways: while the second wave of studies on digital activism focuses especially on the analysis of data gathered from the digital frontstage of these platforms, the importance of the interactions taking place in the backstage will also be stressed here.

attempts to illustrate the usefulness of rediscovering the dimension of collective identity and its specific connection to internal communicative dynamics.

### **Drawing boundaries: Reclaiming collective identity**

The oppositional nature of collective identity formation is a frequent topic of discussion in the social movements scholarship, but also in various other strands of literature. The identification of an *other* and the delineation of boundaries is one of the main mechanisms of collective identity formation, and the very emergence of the movement, the YouTube video created by the 131 university students, can be seen first of all as a strong act of reclamation of identity. According to a radical democracy perspective, conflict lies at the very heart of the process of identification, because the construction of frontiers always entails identification of an ‘other’, which is the essence of how antagonisms arise (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005 [1993]). As this case demonstrates, the construction of frontiers between us and them lies also at the core of the identification process in contemporary activism enhanced through social media platforms (Svensson et al., 2014). Analysing the relevance of these 11 minutes media production, Mexican anthropologist Reguillo (2012) has pointed out that the power of the video rests on the simultaneous presence of three characteristics that were used in order to convey the message: a proper name (a sign), a university ID number (an index) and the exhibited credential (an icon). While the sign worked as an emblem, the condensation of an identity, the number represented the anchor of the name to the reality, and finally the credential embodied a symbol that built a relation of similarity with the represented object. During the video, these elements are continuously repeated, and the message conveyed is particularly powerful because students build an event where individual responsibility is assumed and talk from a “place of identity” (Reguillo, 2012). In so doing, Mexican students appropriate social media to contrast the biased representation that the members of the PRI were manufacturing, reclaim their agency and generate collective identification processes. As Aroch-Fugellie (2013, p. 12) puts it “the name #YoSoy132 indexes collectivity as a foundational value”. The social media practices unleashed on Twitter in reaction to the YouTube video reinforced the process of collective identification of *the other* (the manipulative media at the service of the PRI Party) and at the same time, started the formation of the *we* of the #YoSoy132 movement, composed by *real* university students,

deeply dissatisfied with the situation of the country, with its biased mass media and its corrupted political institutions.

### **“We are heirs”: Proclaiming collective identity**

Another mechanism through which collective identity is constituted is by connecting together different events in space and time into a relevant ‘protest puzzle’ that assigns continuity and coherence to the present struggle and allows the movement to present itself not as some disenfranchised actor, but as heir of the values and ideals of a long tradition of protest. It is significant to recall that the protest escalated precisely when Peña Nieto justified the use of violence in the uprisings of San Salvador Atenco in 2006, when he governed the state of Mexico. These insurrections erupted when the police prevented a group of flower vendors from selling at the Texcoco local market in the State of México. The police reacted and the vendors appealed to the residents of the San Salvador Atenco community that blocked the highway to Texcoco near their town; in response, hundreds of state police were sent by EPN to remove the blockade. According to an investigation of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), during the confrontations 207 people were victims of degrading treatment, 145 were arbitrarily arrested, 26 women were sexually assaulted, and 5 foreigners were beaten and expelled from the country. Other connections to the injustices perpetrated by the PRI are evident in the showing of masks with the face of Carlos Salinas de Gortari during the event at the Iberoamericana and throughout several actions and performances. Former PRI president De Gortari was the protagonist of one of the most controversial elections in the history of Mexico, the 1988 ballots, when during the vote count that was in favour of the Left candidate Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, after a supposed ‘breakdown of the computer system’, the final polls gave the victory to the PRI candidate. One of the strongest manifestations of the activists’ intention to insert the movement as the last heir in the long tradition of Mexican rebellions is the speech *We are heirs* (Somos herederos), performed on May 30, 2012 during the assembly of the movement in the University City (CU) on behalf of the *Memory and historical consciousness* roundtable<sup>4</sup>. During the speech, a prominent #YoSoy132 activist reads in front of a huge crowd the document that summarizes the discussions of the roundtable that aims to provide an historical justification for the emergence of the movement. He initiates recalling the past episodes of contention that have marked the history of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9dkSK1pgzA> (Accessed March 2, 2015). All the quotes are my translations from the original in Spanish.

Mexico in order to “recuperate history, our history, the history of the people of Mexico...The history of which we are participants, heirs and followers”. The workers and *campesinos* movements, the magonism, the Zapatista insurrection and other Indigenous struggles, the students’ movements of the 1960s and of the 1970s, as well as the university strikes in the 1980s and 1990s, the fight against the power of the narcotrafficking industry and the thousands of deaths associated to it, and the violent police repressions of Atenco and Oaxaca become pieces of a multifaceted puzzle of resistance that is explicitly recognized, combined and overtly continued by the activists of #YoSoy132. In so doing, the movement grounds its collective identity in the roots of a long Mexican tradition of indignation and struggle against the injustices, the violence and the repression of the Mexican state, the lies of the PRI and the media manipulation of the Mexican media. The speech ends by acknowledging: “Together we are this history, justice we crave! [...]. Today we decided to be 132, to be history and to be the Mexican consciousness. We do not forget and we will scream from our consciousness now and forever: we are 132”. In so doing, the movement proclaims itself as the last heir of the Mexican history of struggle and critical consciousness.

### ***Backstage memes and identity reinforcement***

Members of #YoSoy132 were actively participating in Facebook groups<sup>5</sup>, and communicated daily using the Facebook chat; these groups constituted environments where activists “carried out multiple activities” (Laura), and where “discussions and information upgrades were constant” (Arianna). Within backstage spaces, such as Facebook groups and chats, activists repeatedly connected their struggle to the Mexican rebellious tradition, thus reaffirming the legitimacy of the #YoSoy132 movement as heir in the same line of the “We are heirs” discourse analysed above. This was done especially through the exchange of pictures and memes<sup>6</sup> of revolutionary figures

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<sup>5</sup> Important Facebook groups for the development of their collective identity were: #YoSoy132-Académicos; Grupo de Trabajo para la Democratización de los medios #YoSoy132; YoSoy132DEM; Comité de estudiantes de Posgrado; YO SOY 132 QUERETARO.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of *meme* refers to the viral spreading of cultural ideas, symbols and practices. The literature addressing this phenomenon is rich and often ambiguous, especially when it comes to clarifying the role that memes play in connection to social media platforms and online practices. I here use the term ‘meme’ or ‘digital meme’ in the meaning assigned to it by my interviewees, who refer to digital pictures or videos with humorous content usually expressed in a text close to the image that make fun of and/or mock a person/group or a certain situation. While the literature has underlined the construction and negotiation of collective identities thanks to the viral capabilities of memes on the social media frontstage (Gal et al., 2015), I hereby stress the importance that memes acquire also when they are stripped of their ‘spreadability’ and they remain just satirical images and videos that are exchanged within

such as Emiliano Zapata and Subcomandante Marcos complemented with ‘incitement texts’ that connected the present situation to the injustices of the past. Urging to follow the path of past revolutionaries for a real change, activists reminded themselves of the historical role they were playing in the Mexican scenario. While these pictures and memes were also widely shared on the social media frontstage, they acquired a particular significance for identity reinforcement within backstage spaces, since they were usually targeted to smaller collectives and groups with a higher degree of intimacy and interactivity that resembles the functioning of small email lists (Kavada, 2009).

### **Networks of trust and solidarity: Maintaining collective identity**

As we previously saw, the creation of collective identity is complemented by the development of new networks of relationships of trust among actors. In a fragmented and violent country where the government, political parties, the police, the military, the mass media, and religious and educational institutions have all lost their credibility, #YoSoy132 functioned as a “powerful process for the reconstruction of the Mexican social tissue” (Susana), by generating “new networks and ties that we can count on, and with which we can share our ideas” (Miguel). This aspect resonates in the following interview’s extract with Susana:

Being 132 implies solidarity, sharing, the generation of networks that would have otherwise not been created, and a level of trust, to know that you can relate to a 132 activist in Baja California that you don’t know but in whom you know you can trust, and this is something special and valuable in this super-fragmented Mexico... This experience made us reflect on how we can generate analogue and digital networks or just human ties, but always starting from love and solidarity... So the point is not just winning a president or not, but in our way of communicating, relate to each other, because sooner or later this will move the foundations of this state.

Social media chats and groups represented crucial environments in which activists could nurture reciprocal ties of solidarity and commitment, a necessary component in the management of collective identities (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010; Hunt & Benford, 2004). Within these more informal and personal settings, activists reaffirmed on an everyday basis their “sense of being together, of being YoSoy132, and of what this belonging meant” (Miguel). This emerges from

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backstage groups and conversations in order to connect with a rebellious past, lower the intensity of the protest, and reinforce internal solidarity.



the following passage from a Facebook group chat of activists from Querétaro at the beginning of September, after the Mexican Electoral Tribunal ratified the legitimacy of Peña Nieto's victory:

Hugo: I am exhausted, I can't take it anymore, you know, what can we do now? Peña won, we knew it, and now what?

Susana: c'mon Hugo, you know it yourself, it was never only about him, it is about ourselves

Cecilia: it is about being strong together, burning together, remember?

Hugo: yeah, I know, and it's great to be with you in this, united

Susana: we are a family, none can change that, the great things we have done

Cecilia: and what we will do!

Hugo: I can't wait to see you tomorrow guys, thanks for being here for me, it means a lot to me

Susana: we are together in this buddy, and remember that they want us to be isolated like before, fragmented and alone...Let's show them that we are strong and that we are pushing together!

Cecilia's expression 'burning together' refers to one of the slogans that the movement adopted from the beginning, the poetical motto "If we don't burn together, who will light this darkness?" that was omnipresent in posters, calls for action, and online spaces.

### ***Digital comfort zones***

An essential digital backstage space was constituted by the *WhatsApp* application for smartphones. Activists from Mexico City started to use it several weeks after the emergence of the movement, when they realized it provided them with "faster", "simpler", and "more immediate" communication capabilities. While they started using one-to-one messages, they quickly switched to group chats in order to take collective decisions and solve organizational issues. But the flow of continuous messages created an environment not only for organization and decision-making processes: group conversations slowly transformed into intimate digital areas where activist could "feel comfortable, open up to comrades about personal feelings" (Elisa) "spaces to spoil us, cuddle, and comfort us for something that turned out bad, or differences we had with other *compañeros*, or even discuss problems of our private lives" (Laura), and where "people would help and comfort me, they would motivate me to keep going on, because I was not alone, I was among people like me" (Alice). WhatsApp messages constituted 'safe' places where activists could express themselves far from the 'official lights of Facebook walls and pages' (Ernesto). We can appreciate here the strength of the "emotion work"

(Jaspers, 2011) in relation to collective identity, as participants experienced joy and empowerment in their encounter and sharing with others.

### ***Practices of ludic activism***

The more personal and intimate environments of the digital backstage were often filled with humour. Within these spaces, activists could “interact less seriously” (Mónica), and conversations were often filled with “jokes, and people started to circulate memes about the same members of the group and the people would laugh and take a break” (Sandra). While the jokes spread on the social media frontstage were “directed towards famous, recognizable, public people” (Andrea), the parodies circulated in the backstage were directed at the same members of the movement participating in the discussions, and they thus constituted acts of ‘self-mockery’ (Anna). Through these practices, Mexican activists would reinforce their belonging to the group, showing that they shared “a common code” (Maria) and “a similar understanding” (Cecilia). Furthermore, the critics expressed to comrades through digital satire also performed another function, namely to “lower the intensity of protest” (Mónica). This aspect acquired particular importance after the 1st of December 2012 (known as #1Dmx), i.e. the presidential inauguration of Enrique Peña Nieto, when various demonstrations were suppressed by federal and local police operations. This moment made evident “the contradictions, the differences, and the multiple expressions that were shacking the identity of #YoSoy132” (Laura), but it was precisely in this particular juncture that the digital exchange of personalized humour intensified. While, given the repression of the government, in the social media frontstage activists started to erase pictures, accounts and pages due to a growing social media paranoia (AUTHOR, 2014b), the social media backstage was filled with self-mockery, satire, and puns that contributed to ease the tension and the inner conflict of the movement, while strengthening its internal solidarity in that important phase of transition.

Together with the backstage use of memes analysed above, these findings highlight the vital role that “ludic activism” (Banski et al, 2013, p.6) played in connection with internal communicative dynamics to lower the costs of activism in relation to fatigue, reinforce internal cohesion (Romanos, 2013), and foster collective identity (Flesher Fominaya, 2007) through the common codes of the digital Mexican generation.

## Final remarks

This article opened acknowledging the current disregard of 2.0 studies for the dimension of collective identity and the internal communicative dynamics of contemporary digital movements, in favour of the analysis of external communication, and the organizational affordances of social media. My ethnography of the Mexican #YoSoy132 movement has shown that the concept of collective identity is still able to yield relevant insights into the study of current movements, especially in connection to the use of social media platforms. Through the appropriations of social media, Mexican students were able to: oppose the negative identification fabricated by the PRI, reclaim their role as heirs of a long tradition of rebellion, generate collective identification processes, and find ‘comfort zones’ to lower the costs of activism, reinforcing their internal solidarity through practices of ‘ludic activism’. While #YoSoy132 activists used the affordances of the social media frontstage (YouTube videos, Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, etc.), they also appropriated the social media backstage (Facebook chats and groups) and the WhatsApp ecosystem in order to negotiate and reinforce their collective identity on an everyday basis. Part of an emerging and vibrant digital sphere, young Mexicans unleashed the full power of social media platforms in their struggle for media democratization, using the characteristic tools and the popular codes of these spaces: videos, tweets, posts, pictures and digital memes. The findings urge to rediscover the nexus between internal communicative dynamics and collective identity that characterized the digital social movements studies of the 1.0 era. In order to do so, it is essential to combine the examination of the data that can be gathered on the digital frontstage of social media, with the careful scrutiny of the practices, the codes and the dynamics that take place in the backstage.

This study reveals that social media are not just the new organizational backbone of protest movements, but constitute complex communication ecologies where the mechanisms of formation and negotiation of identities on both the digital frontstage and the backstage, uncovers the need for future research to grant the proper significance to other nuances of a manifold *communicative resistance spectrum*, such as dialogic, expressive and humorous forms of communication.

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